

Oakland Tribune

Boxer bill for air cargo pilots to carry guns, too

By Lisa Friedman

Tuesday, March 04, 2003 - WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- Pilots who move the nation's packages could be packing heat under anti-terrorism legislation by Sen. Barbara Boxer allowing air cargo pilots to carry guns in the cockpit.

Federal Express, UPS and other cargo carriers plan to fight the bill. They argue that security already is tight on their airplanes, and that allowing pilots to wield weapons could do more harm than good.

"We feel security will not be improved by this," said Steve Alterman, spokesman for the Cargo Airline Association. "We don't carry passengers, we carry cargo. Who are they going to shoot?"

Pilots, however, overwhelmingly support the ability to arm themselves in the cockpit. They said the measure cinches a dangerous loophole in last year's airline security legislation that allows commercial pilots to protect themselves with firearms, but not cargo pilots.

"A 747 full of boxes makes just as deadly a guided missile as a 757 full of people," said John Mazor, spokesman for the Air Line Pilots Association.

About 2,000 cargo flights a day take off from U.S. airports.

The legislation, which Boxer intends to introduce today along with Sen. Jim Bunning, R-Ky., would allow, but would not mandate, the nation's approximately 12,000 cargo pilots to undergo background checks, screening and training programs to make them eligible to have firearms.

Anti-terrorism legislation passed in 2002 initially included cargo pilots among those who would be eligible to carry arms. But along the way in one of many closed-door meetings to negotiate the bill, the word "passenger" was inserted into the provision. That single word change exempted those who fly for cargo carriers.

"This loophole could severely impact the nation's security," Boxer and Bunning wrote late last month in a letter drumming up support for their bill. House Transportation Committee Chairman Don Young, R-Alaska, also supports allowing cargo pilots to arm themselves.

Pilots and the lawmakers who support them argue that because cargo planes do not have strengthened cockpit doors or federal air marshals aboard the flights, they are more vulnerable to attack.

David Bolger, spokesman for UPS said his company and others employ strict security measures from thorough background checks and clearances to limiting the number of people who have access to cargo aircrafts.

"We don't have 250 people on these aircrafts. We don't have in some cases even five people," Bolger said. "It's an entirely different situation than you have in the passenger environment."

Arming cargo pilots likely will not provoke the fierce debate that allowing guns on passenger flights did.

That issue split the Bay Area delegation.

Both Boxer and Sen. Dianne Feinstein voted in favor of allowing pilots to arm themselves. In the House, Democrat Reps. Anna Eshoo of Palo Alto, George Miller of Martinez, Zoe Lofgren of San Jose, Ellen Tauscher of Alamo, Mike Thompson of Napa and Republican Rep. Richard Pombo of Tracy also voted in favor of it.

Democrats Barbara Lee of Oakland, Mike Honda of San Jose, Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco, Pete Stark of Fremont and Lynn Woolsey of Marin opposed the proposal.

Contact Lisa Friedman at lisafriedman@angnewspapers.net